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The Decision Between Action and Inaction: A Study of Moral Judgments

Emily Briggs
Huron University College

The present study was designed to extend the prior research of Cushman et al. (2007) by attempting to demonstrate that Canadian university students would consider moral dilemma scenarios that contained indirect harm to be more permissible than those that contained direct harm, thus providing evidence of the double effect. It was additionally believed that the double effect would be evident in both sexes, but primarily females. Participants were provided with three moral dilemma scenarios that contained either direct harm or indirect harm and where asked to decide whether the protagonist’s actions within each scenario were permissible or not. The results revealed no significant interaction between sex and type of harm on moral judgment ($F(1) = 1.22, p > .05$). The interaction between moral judgment and the types of harm employed within the scenarios also yielded insignificant results. Conversely, a significant interaction was found between sex and moral judgment, and thus confirmed that males are more likely to deem directly harmful scenarios as permissible than females. The results were discussed in terms of the interaction between sex and the permissibility of different types of harm.

The study of moral judgments has been a popular topic in the realm of psychology, philosophy, and law for many years. Within the field of psychology, a topic of recent popularity concerns the extent to which conscious reasoning and/or intuition plays a role in determining whether a judgment is perceived to be moral or immoral (Cushman, Hauser & Young, 2006). As a result, there has been an abundance of explanations generated that concern how individuals move from conscious reasoning to moral verdict and whether this process is controlled or automatic (Cushman, Hauser, Jin, Mikhail & Young, 2007).

One explanation for this debate involves Baron and Royzman’s (2002) notion that
individuals favour indirect harm over direct harm similar to the way in which they favour harmful omissions over harmful acts. Therefore, it was predicted that when harm is indirect, the causes of the harm aside from the decision-maker's choice would generally be considered salient, and consequently preferable. Participants were presented with eight scenarios that contrasted between direct and indirect harm. Each scenario contained two different endings that included an action that harmed some individuals in order to aid others. In one ending, the harm was a direct result of the action, while the harm was an indirect byproduct of the action in the additional ending. After reading the scenarios, the subjects indicated a preference for one of the three options: direct harm, indirect harm, or 'no preference', and offered a justification for their choice. The results of the experiment revealed that the majority of the subjects favoured indirect harm over direct harm. Therefore, Baron and Royzman (2002) concluded that their findings provided evidence for a tendency to favour indirectly harmful options over directly harmful options, irrespective of the associated outcomes, intentions, or self-presentational concerns.

Another explanation concerns Cushman et al.'s (2006) belief that the moral principles used in judgment must be directly compared with those articulated in moral justification, and therefore presumed that some moral principles are available to conscious reasoning whereas others are not. The researchers examined three principles that were believed to guide moral judgment: a) harm caused by action is worse than harm caused by omission, b) harm intended as the means to a goal is worse than harm foreseen as the side effect of a goal, and c) harm involving physical contact with the victim is worse than harm involving no physical contact. Participants were presented with online questionnaires that contained 16 moral scenarios that focused on trade-offs of life and
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dead, but that varied in content. In order to discover whether the presented principles were invoked to explain moral judgments, subjects were asked to rate the protagonist’s harmful actions or omissions on a seven-point scale, with one labeled ‘forbidden’ and seven labeled ‘obligatory’. Participants were also asked to justify their pattern of responses for up to five pairs of scenarios. The results of the study confirmed that subjects generally appealed to the first and third principles in their justifications, but not to the second. Thus, Cushman et al. (2006) concluded that although some moral principles are available for conscious reasoning in a large majority of subjects, others are not available and appear to operate in intuitive processes.

A further explanation comes from Cushman et al. (2007) who thought that humans have an appraisal system that generates moral judgments based on the causal and intentional properties of human action, and therefore believed that when individuals are making moral judgments they rely on the principle of the double effect – the notion that it may be permissible to harm an individual for the greater good if the harm is not the necessary means to the greater good but, rather, merely a foreseen side effect. In attempt to contrast the unconsciously operative principles guiding people’s judgments with their expressed principles, the experimenters used web-based technology in order to collect a large data set of subjects’ responses to a series of moral dilemmas by asking when harm to innocent others is permissible. Each participant was presented with four scenarios where each moral dilemma provided a choice between action and inaction, but both choices resulted in lives saved and lives lost. The results of the experiment concluded that participants deemed scenarios that involved intended harm to be less permissible than scenarios that involved foreseen harm, and therefore the patterns of moral judgment
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provided by the subjects were consistent with the principle of the double effect and showed little variation across differences in sex, age, education level, ethnicity, religion or national affiliation.

As an extension of the prior research by Cushman et al. (2007), the current experiment presented Canadian undergraduate students at the University of Western Ontario with three moral judgment scenarios that were influenced by those utilized by Cushman et al. (2007) and designed to target the principle of the double effect. Overall, it was hypothesized that participants would tend to state that acting in the scenarios that contained indirect harm was more permissible than acting in the scenarios that contained direct harm, which would provide evidence of the double effect. Furthermore, it was believed that the double effect would be evident in both sexes, but more so in female participants, since it has previously been determined that females are more likely to make care-based moral decisions than males are, and therefore tend to prefer indirect harm over direct harm more often than males do (Wark & Krebs, 1996, as cited in Royzman & Baron, 2002).

Method

Participants

Participants included 20 subjects, in which 10 were males and 10 were females. All subjects were students at the University of Western Ontario, with the majority attending the Huron University College campus.
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Materials

Potential subjects were provided with an information sheet that supplied the participants with a general idea of what their participation would entail. Those who agreed to partake in the experiment were provided with a consent form. Subjects were subsequently provided with a questionnaire consisting of three moral dilemmas. Half of the questionnaires contained scenarios that concerned direct harm [see Appendix A], while the other half contained scenarios that concerned indirect harm [see Appendix B]. No explicit attempt was made to ensure the reliability or validity of the measures.

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in a haphazard fashion to students at the University of Western Ontario, making sure to survey equal amounts of males and females. The experiment was introduced as “a study of moral judgments of the students at the University of Western Ontario”. All subjects were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they were not obligated to answer any questions that they felt uncomfortable responding to. In addition, subjects were informed that they were permitted to terminate their participation any time during the experiment. Those who participated in the experiment were required to sign a consent form before beginning the study. Subjects were then presented with one of two questionnaires that contained three moral dilemma scenarios that required choosing either action or inaction in order to resolve a conflict, with either choice resulting in lives saved and lives lost. One questionnaire contained scenarios regarding direct harm, while the other questionnaire contained scenarios regarding indirect harm. Each questionnaire was equally distributed.
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to subjects of both sexes. The characters within the scenarios contained sex-neutral
names in order to prevent any sort of sex bias. Furthermore, artificial cases were used in
order to ensure that subjects would have no familiarity with, or personal attachment to,
the particular details of the cases. No personal information was provided within the
questionnaires and participants were assured that their identities would remain
confidential and that consent forms would remain separate from the completed
questionnaires.

Results

Figure 1 presents the number of direct and indirect scenarios that were found to
be permissible by male and female participants. Female subjects found both the scenarios
that contained direct harm and the scenarios that contained indirect harm to be equally
permissible. The number of scenarios that female subjects believed to be permissible
remained constant and revealed very low permissibility for the scenarios that involved
both types of harm. Conversely, male participants found both the direct and indirect harm
used within the scenarios to be more permissible than females' did. Male subjects found
the direct harm scenarios to be slightly permissible, but found the indirect harm scenarios
to be twice as permissible than those that involved direct harm. As a result, males deemed
the scenarios that contained indirect harm to be more than twice as permissible as females
did. In addition, males deemed the scenarios that involved direct harm to be almost four
times as permissible as females did.

A 2x2 between-subjects ANOVA was conducted in order to compare sex with the
type of harm used within the moral dilemma scenarios. The results reported no statistical
Figure 1. The average number of direct and indirect scenarios found permissible by male and female participants.
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significance between sex and type of harm on moral judgment (F(1) = 1.22, p > .05)
Furthermore, there was no significance found for the interaction between the type of harm and moral judgment. However, the interaction between sex and moral judgment was found to be significant [see Table 1].

Discussion

The results of the current experiment did not support the hypothesis that moral dilemma scenarios that involved indirect harm would be considered more permissible than those that involved direct harm, and therefore evidence of the double effect was not established. In addition, the interaction between the type of harm indicated within the scenarios and moral judgment was deemed insignificant. In spite of this, a significant difference was discovered concerning the difference between sex and moral judgment. This provided evidence for the belief that the double effect would be more prevalent in females than males, which was revealed by directly harmful scenarios being considered less permissible by females than males.

The previous findings of Cushman et al. (2007) revealed a conflicting outcome to that of the present study by demonstrating that participants deemed indirectly harmful scenarios to be more permissible than directly harmful scenarios. This is in opposition to the present study, which did not reveal significant results concerning the greater permissibility for indirectly harmful scenarios in comparison to directly harmful scenarios. A possible reason as to why these two experiments differed could be because Cushman et al. (2007), as well as Cushman et al. (2006) and Baron and Royzman (2002), ensured that the order in which the scenarios were presented within the questionnaires
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were varied and counterbalanced separately for each subject. This is in comparison to the present experiment where the ordering of the scenarios remained constant within both sets of questionnaires, which could have potentially influenced the way in which the subjects deemed the permissibility of the scenarios. Another possible explanation for why the results of the current experiment differed from those of Cushman et al. (2007) could be because the present study only utilized six scenarios that were divided into two sets, resulting in three scenarios per questionnaire. This is in opposition to Cushman et al. (2007) who employed 20 scenarios divided into four sets, resulting in five scenarios per questionnaire. Therefore, by supplying subjects with a greater amount of scenarios to evaluate, Cushman et al. (2007) gave their participants additional opportunities to evaluate directly harmful scenarios as less permissible than indirectly harmful scenarios, which could have consequently altered the mean number of scenarios deemed permissible and therefore provide more evidence in favour of the double effect than in opposition to it. Furthermore, Baron and Royzman (2002) had their participants judge the permissibility of scenarios on a seven-point scale. This is in contrast to the current study where participants merely needed to provide a yes or no answer to the scenarios, which may have limited how the subjects were able to express their moral judgments. By providing participants with a bipolar scale to use when evaluating the permissibility of the scenarios, subjects may be better able to provide more precise answers, which could consequently change how their reactions to the scenarios are represented.

Certain systematic control issues occurred during the present experiment that may have accounted for the insignificant results. For example, no explicit attempt was made in order to assess the reliability or validity of the scenarios that were used to evaluate the
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hypothesis. Therefore, the study may have produced insignificant results because the scenarios did not measure what they were intended to. Furthermore, although the experiment yielded a high response rate, the data was not collected in a completely haphazard manner. A convenience sample was employed to survey subjects, which consequently resulted in subjects being tested under different circumstances. This produced testing sessions that were not identical to one another, causing the generalizability of the results to be limited. In addition, the only control variable that was utilized within the current experiment was to ensure that an equal amount of males and females participated, and therefore adequate control was not maintained.

In attempt to improve future versions of the current experiment, participants should be requested to supply brief justifications for their answers to the provided scenarios. This would provide the researchers with more insight as to why subjects answered a specific way, as well as ensure that participants approach the study in a serious manner. In addition, future editions of the present study should employ more realistic scenarios. The fact that the scenarios used within the current experiment were unrealistic may have made subjects try to think of whether the consequences were equally probable for the two options being compared rather than which was more ethically permissible to partake in.

Regardless of the limitations, the present study addressed practical implications for other issues concerning the process of creating moral judgments, including the debate over the distinction between killing and letting die, as expressed in the controversy over active euthanasia. Philosophical and legal discussions of such issues often make use of such hypothetical scenarios of the sort that were used in the present study (Baron &
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Royzman, 2002). Some of these scenarios involve killing or harming one person in order to save or prevent harm to others. Therefore, explanations provided for fictional scenarios may help to uncover how individuals justify more serious, real-world circumstances, such as euthanasia, capital punishment, or anything that involves providing a benefit to someone when they total amount of benefits is limited, such as providing free healthcare to the poor.

In conclusion, the results of the current experiment illustrated that there was no significant interaction between the type of harm employed within scenarios and sex in regards to moral judgment. The influence that the direct versus indirect harm within scenarios had on moral judgment was also deemed insignificant. However, statistical significance was discovered in terms of the impact that sex had on moral judgment, with active harm being considered more permissible by males in comparison to females. The study was hindered by certain limitations, including the lack of random sampling techniques and poor control for reliability and validity. Future research should vary the ordering of scenarios, request brief justifications for the subjects’ responses, and to use more realistic scenarios.
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Appendix A

Direct Harm Questionnaire

Moral Judgments Questionnaire

Sex: M F

Please read through each scenario and associated question and answer the questions based solely on the information provided.

**Scenario 1:** Alex is standing near the train tracks and sees a train approaching. However, the train’s brakes have failed and the train driver has fainted out of shock. On the track ahead are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. Alex notices a switch box that controls a side track leading off to the right where the train can turn onto. Unfortunately, there is one person on the right hand track. Alex can switch the train to the side track, killing the one; or Alex can refrain from switching the train to the side track, letting the five die.

Is it morally permissible for Alex to switch the train to the side track? Y N

**Scenario 2:** Taylor observes a car speeding down the road and realizes that its breaks have failed, making it unable to avoid hitting a group of seven unaware people just up the road. Taylor is unable to make them aware of the situation; they are effectively helpless. However, there is a large person standing beside Taylor. Taylor is aware that, if the person is pushed in front of the car, the car will hit them and skid off of the road, and the seven people will live. Taylor can refrain from pushing the person in front of the car, letting the seven die; or Taylor can push the person in front of the car, thus killing that person.

Is it morally permissible for Taylor to push the man? Y N

**Scenario 3:** Devon is aboard a yacht with five other people in the middle of the ocean. All of a sudden, the yacht crashes into a large coral reef and begins to sink. Devon and the rest of the passengers climb aboard a safety raft. However, the raft is only strong enough to hold five people, which means that if all six passengers remain inside the raft, it is likely to burst, causing everyone to drown. Devon realizes that if one of the passengers is pushed off the raft, Devon and the remaining passengers will be saved. Devon can push one of the passengers overboard, thus killing that person; or Devon can refrain from killing the passenger, potentially causing everyone to die.

Is it morally permissible for Devon to push the passenger overboard? Y N
Appendix B
Indirect Harm Questionnaire

Moral Judgments Questionnaire

Sex:  M  F

Please read through each scenario and associated question and answer the questions based solely on the information provided.

Scenario 1: Pat is standing near the train tracks. Pat knows trains and can see that the one approaching the bridge is out of control. On the track ahead are five people; the banks are so steep that they will not be able to get off the track in time. Pat knows that the only way to stop an out-of-control train is to block its path with a heavy weight. But the only available, sufficiently heavy weight is a transport truck that is approaching the tracks in front of the train. Pat can warn the truck driver of the approaching train, letting the five die; or Pat can refrain from doing this, killing the truck driver.

Is it morally permissible for Pat to refrain from warning the truck driver?  Y  N

Scenario 2: Hayden observes a car speeding down the road and realizes that its brakes have failed, making it unable to avoid hitting a group of seven unaware people just up the road. Hayden is unable to make them aware of the situation; they are effectively helpless. However, there is a car about to cross the intersection between the speeding car and the group of people. Hayden can warn the driver about the speeding car, letting the seven die; or Hayden can refrain from warning the driver, thus killing the driver.

Is it morally permissible for Hayden to refrain from warning the driver?  Y  N

Scenario 3: Casey is aboard a yacht with five other people in the middle of the ocean. All of a sudden, the yacht crashes into a large coral reef and begins to sink. Casey and the rest of the passengers climb aboard a safety raft. However, the raft is only strong enough to hold five people, which means that if all six passengers remain inside the raft, it is likely to burst, causing everyone to drown. One of the passengers loses their balance and begins to fall off the side of the raft. Casey is the closest person to the falling passenger and has the ability to grab them, preventing them from falling into the ocean and drowning. Casey can refrain from grabbing the passenger, letting that person die; or Casey can grab the passenger, potentially causing everyone to die.

Is it morally permissible for Casey to refrain from grabbing the falling passenger?  Y  N
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Table 1

*The differences in the permissibility of moral judgment scenarios that involved direct and indirect harm in relation to sex*

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